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Introduction: The two poetries

POETRY is notorious for its factionalism; this is a matter of folklore. Yet it is amazingly hard to find documentation for the schisms and groupings into which poets are said to fall. Easier to encounter is the frequent assertion that, whatever factions may or may not exist, "there are only two kinds of poetry: good and bad".

Such question-begging platitudes, dodging as they do the ideological and aesthetic differences among poets' programmes of work — I want to call them paradigms — do not take us very far towards an understanding of the work itself.

As Charles Bernstein has said:

> We have to get over, as in getting over a disease, the idea that we can "all" speak to one another in the universal voice of poetry. History still mars our words, and we will be transparent to one another only when history itself disappears. For as long as social relations are skewed, who speaks in poetry can never be a neutral matter.[1]

It will be a major contention of this study that it is impossible to understand any poetry without taking into account the paradigm within which it is made: that is to say, its cultural history, its overall aesthetic purpose, the expectations it assumes in its community of readers. In particular, I will demonstrate that an important strand of poetry in the British Isles since the 1960s, originating in the modernist tradition, has been undervalued — more often, ignored completely — partly at least because its aesthetic programmes cannot be assimilated into the conservative aesthetic that has dominated British poetry in the past few decades: the tradition whose key exemplars might include Hardy, Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Auden and Larkin.[2] It is an aesthetic so all-pervasive that it is no longer perceived as a specific paradigm but is simply the way poetry is.[3] Within this cultural landscape, the modernist work I am particularly interested in, a phenomenon first identified by the late Eric Mottram as "The British Poetry Revival",[4] fits badly.

I want to argue that, aside from all the factions and groupuscules that pepper the poetry scene, the schism between modernist-derived, or (to use a contentious term I examine below) avant-garde work, on the one hand, and other poetries in English, on the other,[5] is a major rift or fault-line running through contemporary British poetry.[6] And it is the poetics and history of the former that I shall be looking at.

Mottram himself played a leading role the last time this schism came to the attention of the wider public, in the mid-1970s. The episode in which the Arts

Council of Great Britain (as it then was) forcibly intervened in the affairs of the Poetry Society, provoking the resignation of a number of poets with modernist affiliations from its ruling council, has been more than adequately narrated elsewhere.[7] But these events were preceded, in 1971, by Mottram's being invited to edit Poetry Review, the organ of the Society.[8] It was as though a whirlwind had hit that august journal.

Edited by Derek Parker, the Winter 1970/71 issue had featured such well-known "mainstream" poets as William Plomer, Gavin Ewart and Fleur Adcock. Like most issues of the previous few years, its pages reflected a literary consensus that privileged accessibility and conservatism of form. By the Autumn 1971 issue, with Mottram now in his stride, there had been a complete revolution, the pages being dominated by work of the kind that first saw publication in the avant-garde small presses of the previous decade: Lee Harwood, Stuart Montgomery, Jeff Nuttall, Paul Evans, Val Warner, Gael Turnbull, Roy Fisher, Allen Fisher, Richard Miller, Dom Sylvester Houedard — alongside Muriel Rukeyser, Robert Duncan, Michael McClure, Bill Butler and Gilbert Sorrentino from the USA. The combination of modernists and Americans proved too much for many of the Society's long-standing members, and it is likely that this triggered the response that ended with Arts Council Literature Director, Charles Osborne's intervention four years later.

Mottram's editorship ran for 20 issues between 1971 and 1977, before the Arts Council directly dissolved the editorial board of the Review. Today Poetry Review publishes a range of work, from academic verse to more populist, slam and performance type poetry, but, until recently at least, has largely ignored the so-called avant-garde.[9] In effect, it went underground for 20 years. Griffiths and Cobbing (1988), for example, document the failure of several key small presses, such as Writers Forum, Aloes, Arc, Albion Village and Trigram, to secure grant aid in 1977/78 and succeeding years, in sharp contrast with the relative success of previous years.[10]

For some, such as the poet Peter Riley, this exile was largely self-imposed, and the wrong strategy to have adopted:

> If there's a 'need to ghettoise poetry' in this country, well, no one has done more ghettoising than the poets themselves. They have ghettoised each other and they have ghettoised themselves, endlessly and relentlessly. And the mid-to-late 1970s was when they started doing this in earnest. Before that there was some hope, I'd say, of establishing a real poetic presence in the public arena, there were people around capable of it, and there were inexperienced people who could have been helped into it if older figures had acted with wisdom.
>
> But no, we opted for little enclaves, small presses, little magazines, tiny circuits feeding off themselves, closed markets. Such things had happened before of course, especially in the 1940s, there were failures to contact the public by very real poets which weren't their own faults and have distorted the history. But in the 1970s people started rejoicing in this failure and seeing it as a badge of superiority. And of course other people leapt into the vacuum thus created, journalist-poets eager for success,

and established their own kinds of comparative easy poetry as the national product, henceforth thought of by all the rest of the world as what british poetry is doing, an immense ignorance which is now so widespread it has become impregnable. It could have been quite different, but there were various kinds of despisal of the public field around with many different motivations, from high-catholic intellectuality to underdog resentment. The results of this, which was at least in some quarters a perfectly conscious decision, can be seen all round us now. It has produced a real lost generation of poets. [11]

Riley's view is probably a minority one among the poetry community of which he is part. It is decidedly not that of Mottram, who repeatedly attacked the British "literary establishment", which he identified as a consortium of public funding bodies, academics, mainstream commercial publishers and the books editors and reviewers of the national "quality" press and literary weeklies. For him, the problem had its roots further back in time:

Since the 1930s, officially-sanctioned British poetry had favoured minimal intervention and information, and maximum ironic finesse, with personal anecdote, covered with a social veneer or location of elements in the country. It favoured the urbanely witty or baroquely emotional rather than the thoroughly informed intelligence willing and eager to risk imaginative forms. Official preference could not tolerate an art that went beyond leisure-hours consumer inclination to rapid reading; work which might necessitate concentration, trained ability to read, and a willingness to entertain the prospect of new forms and materials. [12]

Riley may have a point in so far as many of the poets I shall be studying are unwilling to have any truck with the public face of literature, actively preferring to publish with small presses rather than make the compromises required by the media and the world of big publishing. And the semi-clandestine nature of the discourse around this poetry, particularly in the years immediately following the Poetry Society débâcle — the editions so fugitive you couldn't buy them anywhere, the unreasoning suspicion of any activity that could be construed as commerce, the badly publicised readings in dingy pub upper-rooms otherwise used by the Freemasons, the tight social networks, until very recently overwhelmingly male-dominated and still almost entirely white — all this arguably presented an unfriendly face to those outsiders genuinely eager to find out more.

Yet it is hard to agree with his argument that self-ghettoising is solely responsible for the "lost generation of poets", or that it could all have been different had the poets been a little less unbending. The "British literary establishment" may not be quite the monolith it once was, yet other forces have come into play since the 1980s, and the end of the century is inhospitable to difficult art. In the age of the sound-bite and the revelatory anecdote, of business sponsorship and public relations, what place is there for Mottram's "thoroughly informed intelligence willing and eager to risk imaginative

forms"?

ONE poet who, in the opinion of many, thoroughly merits Mottram's description — Mottram himself clearly thought so, for he included an extract from his early poem "Long Shout to Kernewek" in that Autumn 1971 issue of Poetry Review, and continued to be closely associated with him for the next two decades — is Allen Fisher. Theorist and publisher as well as poet, conceptual artist[13] and latterly painter, his 1985 book-length essay Necessary Business,[14] published by his own Spanner imprint, is an attempt to situate the poetry of his mentor, Mottram, alongside that of an equivalent figure at Cambridge University, J H Prynne, and of a younger poet then associated with the London experimentalist scene, Cris Cheek. In particular, he chooses three books as exemplary texts: Mottram's 1980 Mediate, Prynne's Down Where Changed and Cheek's A Present,[15] the reading of which, he believes, "affirms Pound's conviction that literature's function is to incite humanity to continue living; that it is nutrition of impulse".[16]

Fisher's essay, in which are embedded interviews conducted with two of the three poets discussed, is a bravura attempt to define a field of action while refusing to name, and thus hobble it. His context is the reduced social space of these poetries immediately following the explosion of the 1970s, as he explains in his Foreword:

> The text that follows was made between 1980 and 1984, a period of entrenchment and awe. A situation of punctuated flux where technique lost most of its predictive value. A time in which it is still obvious that to use terms like pertinence, aesthetics or incitation, as the following does, is to be speaking in a considerably small room. (p163)

The first key word here is pertinence, a coinage indicating a shared poetics of the open text (open but not arbitrary) that must be apprehended through active engagement on the part of the reader:

> It is only through engagement that pertinence may be revealed; an engagement which accepts that textual meaning is always recreated by new readers, but not that any meanings may be imposed on a text. (p171)

It is a cheeky coinage, in that it allows for the possibility of the opposite tendency in poetry — the mimetic, the use of closed forms to conduct meanings — to be dubbed impertinent.

Fisher's method in Necessary Business (and it is also a method in his poetry, where key words and phrases achieve the resonance of meaning over a long period) is to allow his terms to pervade his text. Nowhere in the essay does he attempt to define "pertinence"; he is content to let the coinage circulate through

to be assigned a value by the alert reader. This method has its weaknesses. The reader is apt to feel overloaded — though a second or third reading of the text clarifies much. More seriously, the strategy runs the risk of failing entirely to engage the uncommitted reader. Yet it is possible for the "considerably small room" he wryly suggests he is speaking in to be opened up, for scrutiny and enjoyment.

Fisher's small room, while perhaps ironically suggesting the cramped spaces, often above pubs, where readings of his and others' poetry have taken place, is a metaphor for the social and political space allocated to the poetics that he regards as "pertinent", in a culture where the dominant paradigm of poetry is other than this. This word paradigm is another of his key words:

> It is the insistence in this essay that necessary changes in the general paradigm of "the poem" have been made, and that such changes may be approached through poetry's aesthetic function. The reading implicit in those weeklies reviewing poetry suggests a general reliance on paradigms of the poem quite different from those discernible through the examples I have chosen for this essay [i.e. Prynne, Mottram, Cheek], and thus quite different from the paradigms I would choose as necessary contributions to pertinence in poetry." (p176)

The usage here is borrowed from Thomas S Kuhn.[17] But the notion that poetry is analysable in terms of the paradigm it belongs to, or, to put it another way, the community it constructs for itself, is one that is surprisingly poorly understood, and leads, as I have already argued, to the unthinking acceptance of the hegemony of the dominant paradigm. This frequently takes place without even a recognition that it is a paradigm: hence, other poetries become characterised as deviations from or "inferior" reflections of the dominant mode, when in fact their raison d'être is radically different.

Kuhn's book is, of course, about science, and concerns itself with the construction of scientific communities. His central thesis, now well-known, is that science does not progress inexorably and gradually towards a greater approximation of "truth"; rather, it goes through a succession of periods of stability during which "normal science" is practised — that is, there is a consensus about the types of "problem-solutions" that require attention, and about methodology — interspersed with episodes of "revolution" when the terms of reference are shaken up and altered, perhaps as a result of a crisis in the old world-view, or paradigm.

The thesis has wider application than as a way of considering science. Fisher's use of it to define different poetic discourses is in fact prefigured to some extent by Kuhn in his "Postscript" to the 1970 edition of his work:

> To one last reaction to this book, my answer must be of a different sort. A number of those who have taken pleasure from it have done so less because it illuminates science than because they read its main theses as applicable to many other fields as well. I see what they mean and would not like to discourage their attempts to extend the

position, but their reaction has nevertheless puzzled me. To the extent that the book portrays scientific development as a succession of tradition-bound periods punctuated by non-cumulative breaks, its theses are undoubtedly of wide applicability. But they should be, for they are borrowed from other fields. Historians of literature, of music, of the arts, of political development, and of many other human activities have long described their subjects in the same way.[18]

He goes on to explain that his purpose is, on the contrary, to show in what ways scientific paradigms differ from others. One of these is the "absence ... of competing schools in the developed sciences". In other words, scientific paradigms tend to supplant one another, whereas those in other fields co-exist in a state either of competition or tolerance.

In poetry, the "problem-solution" — to be summarised, say, as "how to render poetic truth" — is really a heterogeneity of different complexes of problem-solutions, each attaching to itself a tradition and a community which that particular poetry both constructs and is constructed by. This makes it impossible to rank all poetry hierarchically in terms of "merit" or "excellence", that is, the extent to which it corresponds to the norms set by the dominant paradigm — with the upper echelons gaining promotion to that Premier League known as "the canon". Yet that is how "official culture" (as embodied in the poetry publishing policies of the mainstream publishers, the book review columns of the national papers, the National Poetry Competition) sees it. There is also a left-wing version of this centralist fantasy: a would-be radical position that rejects anything that is deemed to be "incomprehensible" or does not appear to speak to (or for) "the community" (the vogue word in former times would have been "the masses"), forgetting that each poetry has a corresponding community.

As Ron Silliman has put it, in the introduction to his anthology of "language" poetry, In the American Tree,

> ... each audience is a distinct social grouping, a community whether latent or manifest. It is now plain that any debate over who is, or is not, a better writer, or what is, or is not, a more legitimate writing is, for the most part, a surrogate social struggle. The more pertinent questions are what is the community being addressed in the writing, how does the writing participate in the constitution of this audience, and is it effective in doing so.[19]

Silliman's reference to "effectiveness" — characterised as the success with which the writing addresses its community — is a perhaps not altogether convincing defence against the possible charge that this analysis leaves no basis for assessing the quality of a piece of writing, that such cultural pluralism risks promoting an "anything goes" approach. Fisher's notion of "pertinence" is at once more nebulous and more fruitful with possibilities. It is based on a belief in poetry's aesthetic function ("the idea that the political potential of poetry rests on poetry's dominant function, its aesthetic"[20]), which is derived from his

reading of Mukarovsky. He is less pluralist than Silliman, readier to nail his colours to the mast in his designation of pertinent and impertinent poetics. Perhaps in this he reflects the more embattled socio-political circumstances of the British literary scene, with its hints of class prejudice and social polarisation — while Silliman, though making reference to social struggle, and influenced by Marxist politics, is operating within a more expansive American situation, where there is a more clearly delineated micro-politics of different communities.[21]

Fisher's use of Mukarovsky tends to suggest a view of the aesthetic as a single realm. However, he accords with Silliman that different poetries choose their audiences through the reading strategies they offer. His comment, quoted earlier, that "The reading implicit in those weeklies reviewing poetry suggests a general reliance on paradigms of the poem quite different from those discernible through the examples I have chosen for this essay" is triggered by an instance he chooses to illustrate, implicitly, the confusion of one paradigm with another: the poet Michael Hofmann's casual comparison of a Matthew Sweeney poem with the work of Joseph Beuys.[22]

There are two questions I want to pose here:

1. Why does Hofmann make this comparison in the first place?

2. Why does Fisher consider it to be absurd?

Neither question is answered directly in Necessary Business. Perhaps Fisher thinks the answer to the second, at least, is self-evident. The Sweeney poem is, as befits a competition-winning poem, short enough to be quoted in its entirety:

> ENDS
>
> At my end of the earth the Atlantic began.
> On good days trawlers were flecks far out,
> at night the green waves were luminous.
> Gulls were the birds that gobbled my crusts
> and the air in my bedroom was salty.
> For two weeks once a whale decayed
> on the pale beach while no-one swam.
> It was gelignite that cleared the air.
>
> The uses of village carpenters were many.
> Mine made me a pine box with a door,
> tarpaulin-roofed, a front of fine-meshed wire.
> It suited my friend, the albino mouse
> who came from Derry and ate newspaper
> and laid black grains on the floor.
> When he walked his tail slithered behind.
> And when I holidayed once, he starved.[23]

This poem was chosen as Prudence Farmer poem of the year, 1984, in the New Statesman. The Prudence Farmer award of £100 was given to the author of

the best poem to have appeared in the New Statesman in the previous year, in the opinion of a guest judge (in this case Michael Hofmann). Naturally, as Hofmann himself implies in his note on the year's batch, we are already talking about a self-selecting sub-genre of poetry: what he calls the "magazine-poem". In other words, the kind of poem that is used in boxed-off spaces in the weekly political journals of the left (the Statesman) and right (the Spectator) and in the now defunct The Listener. Such work needs to be compact, both in terms of length and procedures — there is no space for expansive open-field gestures here. It is required to have a "meaning" that is relatively easily assimilable by the average reader of the publication, while not distracting too much from the journalistic content it is juxtaposed to. If one were to be unkind, one might say it should flatter the hard-pressed reader with little real interest in poetry that s/he is consuming a nugget of "culture" — in this way, the magazine-poem works much like the book reviews in the Sunday papers, absolving the reader from the hard work of actually reading the books.

There are one or two things to be said in favour of the modest poem above. It eschews the flashy smart-aleckry of the then-fashionable work of the "Martian" school.[24] As descriptive writing it succeeds in "painting a picture" with an economy of means, and it doesn't belabour its point. Hofmann, explaining why he chose it, stresses its careful balance:

> Two episodes make up a whole childhood. The poem constructs a world and populates it within sixteen lines. It is written with the clarity of a parable, with naturalness and a sly humour; balancing, for instance, not only sea with land, mouse with whale, but also the holiday and the two weeks while no one swam and, in a more deadly way, gelignite and Derry and newspapers.

One might quarrel with Hofmann's reading of certain significances into the poem. Northern Irish poets seem either to have it too easy or, depending on which way one looks at it, to be trapped by their own socio-political circumstances: the very mention of a place-name (Derry) seemingly conjures up the ghost of the "troubles". This is either an easy route to the Nobel Prize or an annoying legacy that cannot be escaped. (How different it would be had the mouse come from, say, Basingstoke.)

More seriously, the language in the poem holds hardly any interest; it is plain to the point of dullness, pared down to a functionalism that would befit good journalistic practice but scarcely makes for poetry worth a second read. Just as worrying is the too-easy elegiac tone, one that permeates this sort of "magazine-poem" (and its cousin, the kind of poem written expressly to win poetry competitions). The familiar elements are all there: autobiographical content, preferably harking back to a middle-class childhood (the proprietorial tone adopted towards the "village carpenters" is especially grating), the frequent use of the simple past tense in descriptive/narrative mode, and a moment of sex or death tastefully handled. (Admittedly, the death is usually

that of a parent or grandparent rather than a pet.)

The final line — one might even call it a punch-line, with its calculated shock — serves as closure and epiphany. The epiphany is a common feature of this particular sub-paradigm; it is what gives the poem its "point". In this case, the mouse's death balances the whale's, all seen sub specie aeternitatis — and is given added poignancy through being caused by selfish carelessness.

What does Hofmann find in this poem to compare with the work of Joseph Beuys? His commentary continues:

> The things in the poem are as well assorted and as gravely significant as they are in a Joseph Beuys sculpture, without being at all portentous.

Beuys' work encompasses sculpture, painting, drawing, installation and performance. The "meanings" in it are spread passim — it is not easy to point to a particular work and elucidate its "message", yet its significance as a whole grows the more one engages with its multiplicity. A voice-over comment in the Channel 4 State of the Art programme on Beuys — "Objects are material and metaphor"[25] — highlights Hofmann's "category error". There is no sense of that unity of material and metaphor in the Sweeney poem, where the language merely carries the metaphors.

Allen Fisher has lectured on Beuys; in a two-part talk given at 67 Balfour Street, London[26] he discussed this very overdetermination — a word I use to include both "polysemy" and "metaphor" — which constructs a space for the observer/reader to participate in the meaning-making. Beuys' well-known use of the materials felt and fat is not simply reducible to their autobiographical meaning (these materials once saved his life following a plane crash) — they are palpable presences in themselves and as themselves in his many sculptures and installations. Other features of Beuys' work are the conjunction of chance operations and automatic drawings with "natural" growth; the persistent motifs such as ladders and hooks; and the multivalence of the totem/shaman/science complex, with its necessary internal oppositions and potential for both good and evil simultaneously, a conception summed up in the word "plight".

Such overdetermination demands a more sophisticated response and is at the same time more generous in its invitation to participate in meaning-making than a purely metaphorical or symbolic programme in the simpler sense would be. The Sweeney poem neither makes such demands nor extends such invitations. Its core of concern (a sense of responsibility for living things, regret for what has passed — perhaps that famous picture of Beuys cuddling a dead hare prompted Hofmann to make a facile comparison) is simply uncovered for the caring reader to gaze upon.

But I am now reaching the point where I risk being unfair to Sweeney, who after all did not ask for his short poem to be compared to the work of Beuys. Let us now turn instead to a poem by Allen Fisher published in the same

period, the mid-1980s.

"Atkins Stomp" is the sixth of the 14 poems in his book Brixton Fractals.[27] Like the Sweeney poem, it has a symmetrical structure: four numbered stanzas of more or less 32 lines each (depending on how one counts enjambements). It, too, is located in a particular time and place; in this case, Brixton, South London, in the early 1980s. Here is the first stanza:

ATKINS STOMP

1
"I don't know how humanity stands it
I think I'm in danger of losing altitude
In a catacomb, hope for future bliss
My hand writes on a tangent to cup spills.
At bottom a low trellis, beyond it a narrow lawn
Climbs a stool to feed meter for gas
"The enormous tragedy of the dream
No capacity to express demands for tomorrow.
Next door she say she wants to scrub my potatoes
Escape over the gate with a peach
On poster a dove sips neon
Disease promoted as health.   London.

A cat walks garden wall to the railing
the path still goes from the gate
Sent in the 'district support unit'
Trees and shrubs with dead foliage in summer.
"Take that smile off your face
Two pound of maggots wouldn't reach a tench,
        that kind of rigid
Laced on the koran a flowering meadow
Repast glows in the heads.
Ate all I famished
"three young men at the door
, digged a ditch round me
A tree in the centre, then a low wall.
Bounce a ball against a brick hammering pavement
Decides between gas and hot air
We exhume the past, dissolve parliament
"I don't know how humanity stands it
Walked down the table to where the chairman sat
Organising rain with a sponge push
Bone heads in rows
Shits on daffodils showers them with sod.

This is not the normative language of description and narrative. That is not to say there is no description ("A tree in the centre, then a low wall") or narrative ("A cat walks garden wall to the railing"), but the discourse is

discontinuous, jagged; as in the visual arts of the 20th century, the techniques used include collage and montage. As with the Sweeney poem, there is a strong sense of place, yet the reality of that place is rendered as in a Cubist painting rather than a snapshot: there are fragments of (overheard?) conversation ("Next door she say she wants to scrub my potatoes"; ""Take that smile off your face") but no speaker is named; action described with the agent implied ("Shits on daffodils showers them with sod"); snatches of more elevated-sounding discourse (""The enormous tragedy of the dream", repeated, with its opening quotation marks, as elsewhere, not balanced by a closing pair). The poet/narrator's comment is implied in the couplet "On poster a dove sips neon / Disease promoted as health.   London." But the reader must work to make sense of it all; the poet does not conveniently wrap the poem's meaning up for her.

There are other curiosities to point out: for instance, typographical irregularities. I have already mentioned the instances of opening quotation marks not balanced out, creating uncertainty about where a fragment ends. The notes at the back of the book indicate that lines with quotation marks are taken from Pound's radio broadcasts and The Pisan Cantos, though it is not clear whether every line so marked has this provenance. One line is italicised; there are five other italicised lines in the remainder of the poem. Again, the notes reveal they are from three poems by Stefan George. Finally, the poem is peppered with single words in a non-serif typeface (in the above extract, "catacomb", "poster", "koran", "exhume"); they are from a word list provided by the poet Richard Miller, and clearly function as an irruption of the aleatory, or chance, which Fisher has chosen to incorporate into his textual weave.

The three stanzas following resonate with increasing richness. In stanza four, "Two pounds of anchor wouldn't reach bottom, / that kind of tide" picks up from "Two pounds of maggots wouldn't reach tench, / that kind of rigid". "Escape over the gate with a peach" becomes magnified to "Escape over the gate from a tiger" in stanza three, both lines suggesting the play and fantasy of children on the council estate where the poet lives and observes, and both also echoing Blake, one of the continuing, half-hidden presences in Brixton Fractals and in Fisher's work generally. "Helicopters over paradise" is a repeated line in stanza two, a haunting image from the Brixton riots of the early 1980s, and of the potential for ecstatic life denied in the inner cities of the late 20th century.

But the poem also resonates more widely in the larger context of the book of which it is part. The endnote citing other "resources" used in the poem — Investor's Chronicle, Hansard, Janson, Mandelbrot (the inventor of the term "fractal"), Sedgwick — begins to give an idea of the range of reference in Brixton Fractals, from the fields of finance, politics, art history and mathematics. It is clear by now that this poem is not going to win any magazine competitions. The poem, as a field of force, cannot be contained within its own boundaries; it interferes with and is interfered with by material used in the

other poems of the set, which is in turn only part of a larger project called "Gravity as a consequence of shape". This project, an aspect of Fisher's ongoing major work since his Place project was completed in the late 1970s, consists of a sequence of poems with arbitrary titles taken from an alphabetical list of jazz dances; thus, "Atkins Stomp" is preceded (in order of composition, not of publication) by "African Boog", "African Twist" and "Around the World", and followed by "Ballin' the Jack", "Banda" and "Bel Air".

To sum up: while giving an initial impression of chaos, the four stanzas of "Atkins Stomp" are as carefully crafted as the two of "Ends". They constitute an energetic complexity, at the edge of, but never descending into chaos. The materiality of language as the substance of the poem — what it is made of — is constantly foregrounded by the rapid shifts in register and other discontinuities, even as that language carries forward the argument. The poem subverts itself again and again with humour and parody of its own language. There is a profound sense of the tragedies, comedies and multiple modalities experienced in inner city life; yet there is no moment of epiphany, no punch-line.[28]

Such poetry may very well be compared in its methodology with visual artists such as Beuys, or with the music of Berio or Stockhausen. In other words, it is not out of place in the great current of 20th century modernism. The comparison of Sweeney's poem with Beuys, on the other hand, is forced; Michael Hofmann's analogy reads like an attempt to tap into the cultural capital of Beuys, a manoeuvre of cultural appropriation and exclusion. By claiming the comparison, Hofmann claims for Sweeney the cultural space that in reality should be occupied by poets like Fisher — and, in my opinion, also diminishes the work of Beuys.[29]

I would like to make another comparison. In trying to discuss poems as ordered systems, I have already alluded to concepts from physics such as chaos and complexity. Physicists and biochemists recognise two major types of ordered systems. The first kind are known as low-energy equilibrium systems. These are systems that seek their state of lowest energy, at which point no further input of energy is needed to maintain the system. An example, cited by Stuart Kauffman,[30] is a ball in a bowl that rolls to the bottom, wobbles and stops. Its kinetic energy, acquired because of gravity, is dissipated into heat by friction.

The second type are nonequilibrium structures. These are systems that require a continuing input of energy to sustain their ordered structure. One example is a whirlpool in a bathtub. Once formed, Kauffman explains, the non-equilibrium swirl can remain stable for long periods if water is continuously added to the tub and the drain left open. The Great Red Spot, a whirlpool in the upper atmosphere on the planet Jupiter that has existed for centuries, is an example of such a system. Most living systems — organisations of matter and energy through which both matter and energy flow — can be considered as

nonequilibrium structures.

The poetics involved in poetry of the type Allen Fisher writes, requiring as it does continuous creative input of the reader to constellate its energy, driven by the material rush of its language, seems to have more in common with nonequilibrium structures. While remaining stable, it appears to shimmer with new possibilities at each reading. By contrast, the Sweeney type of poem, with its pared-down language, lacking intrinsic interest as material and therefore only functioning as the bearer of a single, semantic meaning, seems to tend to wind down into a low-energy equilibrium state. The compensations the poet makes for the lack of overdetermination involve balancing symmetries of meaning: in this case, the death of the whale against the death of the mouse, days against nights, the end of the earth and the beginning of the ocean. But these are not dynamic complexes of meaning; one could easily sort all the elements of the poem into two discrete piles, just as the poem itself divides neatly into its two symmetrical stanzas.

IT will be obvious from the foregoing where the present writer's sympathies lie. But, although it is true that I find the Allen Fisher poem richer, subtler and more vital than the Matthew Sweeney, my purpose is not to demonstrate the superiority of one over the other, nor even of one poetic paradigm over another. Rather, I have attempted to show that these two texts have different rationales; they make different demands on the reader, and their success or failure must be measured according to different criteria.

If I have emphasised the qualities of "Atkins Stomp" as against the shortcomings of "Ends", this may perhaps serve to redress an imbalance; poetry which employs non-normative language or procedures, or which foregrounds formalistic and materialistic elements in its linguistic organisation is frequently misunderstood, either as being over-cerebral or obscure, or as incompetent or slapdash. For example: "There is so much intellectual engagement in Act that it seems phoniness, or knowingness, rather than knowledge....This concern with time and movement is too intellectual..."[31] Or alternatively: "bitty and splashy ... obligatory non sequitur".[32] The criticism falls into two camps: either the poetry is said to fail to engage the reader emotionally because of its alleged obscurity and over-emphasis on formalism, or it is damned as the product of an author who has failed to achieve the limpid qualities of "good writing". I hope I have gone some way to showing that, in the case of "Atkins Stomp" at least, these charges are without foundation. The poem does not yield all its qualities at once, and crucially depends on a sympathetic and creative approach on the part of the reader; yet it has surface qualities in its humour, sound-patterning, vigour and attack which can draw readers into its world of sound and signification, so that repeated readings are

richly rewarded. It is impossible to arrive at a summation of the poem's "meaning" as an isolatable fact, and this is part of its fascination. By contrast, "Ends" has a symmetrical form that is superficially pleasing, but, despite Hofmann's arguments in its favour, it would appear to this author that it exhausts its signification potential relatively rapidly; once its central "problem-solution" is exposed, its appeal diminishes.

It may be objected that I have done no more than compare two individual poems, and that it is not permissible to draw broader conclusions about paradigms from these particular texts.

Furthermore, an objection that may be made by those sympathetic to the Fisher paradigm, among others, is that the kind of close reading I have employed above is an inappropriate technique, and that I run the risk of pulling Fisher's poem back towards a normative, reductive analysis. This criticism would stem from the argument that only "engagement"[33] with the text could produce an appropriate response; or, alternatively, that only an approach driven by literary theory could make sense of the text, and any straight comparison with the Sweeney in a close-reading focus is inappropriate.

Thirdly, it may be said that I have been unfair in selecting these two examples: the Allen Fisher poem is taken from a published collection and is clearly part of a larger structure, whereas the Matthew Sweeney poem is (as Hofmann has noted above) an example of a limited genre, the "magazine poem" or "competition poem". I am not comparing like with like.

To deal with the third point first: Sweeney's poem may indeed be a special case, but it is not that special. Its concision marks it out as a typical "magazine poem", but it is not untypical of his work of that period, or of other work published in collections by the more mainstream publishing houses such as Faber & Faber, OUP and Secker & Warburg. Its conceits and procedures are familiar, and tacitly accepted by Hofmann in his judgement as normative. And yes: I am not comparing like with like, which is the point of the comparison.

As to the appropriateness of the terms on which Fisher's text is discussed, it is of course the case that readerly engagement with it is in the end the only way to appreciate how it is constituted and to what end. As with many products of modernism in literature and other artforms, it is sui generis: it constructs its own rules in its very enactment. Therefore it cannot be compared with a standard model, as would be the case, for example, with a formal sonnet. It must be apprehended on its own terms. Yet that does not mean one cannot talk about the elements of its composition, and compare them with those constituting a more conservatively imagined poem. Meticulousness of construction, balance, pacing, humour, resonances and clashes of language-patterns, even what one may term beauty of phrase: all these are palpable attributes of the poem that may be discerned by the alert reader. To point these out is not to deny the radicalness of Fisher's conception.

It is the case that poetry such as Fisher's often has an important theoretical or

political basis. In the following pages I will explore some of the theoretical rationale for such writings. But I want to ground such exploring in an examination of particular, primary texts. Too much criticism of such poetry, both pro and anti, has been based on theorised generalities, with little reference to actual poems.[34]

This brings me back to the first objection: that these two poems are insufficient evidence from which to draw general inferences. I propose, in this study, to look at an exemplary range of poems and poetic texts of the "British Poetry Revival" and its aftermath, as a basis for more generalised conclusions. I will show that, whereas on the one hand, there are contradictions and conflicts within this field of action — the most obvious of which is the split between the so-called "Cambridge" and "London" schools — on the other hand, this poetry has significant features in common which mark it out from the productions of what I have termed the mainstream.

BEFORE going any further, however, we must grasp the nettle of nomenclature. The use of the term "avant-garde", in inverted commas or otherwise, is problematical. Obscure in origin, the term seems to have become current in the early 19th century. A military metaphor (it literally means the vanguard of an army), "avant-garde" seems increasingly inappropriate as a term within the complex social and literary pluralities of the end of the 20th century, suggesting as it does a single literary or artistic path, where the brave few tread the ground others will later follow. We can no longer presuppose that this is the case. Yet, though the "death of the avant-garde" has been proclaimed on numerous occasions in the 20th century,[35] the term persists, as a useful shorthand.

The theoretical literature surrounding it is extensive. Poggioli, Russell and Bürger[36] have variously described the oppositional stance implied by the term, whether this is seen as an expression of alienation from social and cultural conditions (Poggioli), or as operating primarily within the aesthetic realm (Russell), or as a form of activism directed against the institution of art (or literature) itself (Bürger). The relationship between aesthetics and politics is a recurrent theme in these discussions, as is that between the avant-garde and modernism. Mann sums it up:

> Studies that focus on the similarity or partnership between modernism and the avant-garde tend to emphasize aesthetic issues, whereas studies that argue for the distinction between them tend to emphasize ideology.[37]

Although "avant-garde" is hard to avoid as a convenient label, few if any of the poets I am looking at would apply the term to themselves or their own work without a hint at least of irony. Charles Bernstein distances even his own

literary forebears from the notion:

> [Gertrude] Stein spoke not of being avant-garde, not of futurity, but of being contemporary.[38]

And Mann, referring to the movement of which Bernstein has been a leading member, problematises its relationship to the much-cited "death of the avant-garde":

> Even as these obituaries were peaking — around 1975, when the most was being said about how little was left to say — a network of so-called language-centered writers was emerging, largely in the San Francisco Bay Area and New York. Experimental, deeply critical of current poetic practice and the ideological character of ordinary and literary language, often theoretically militant about their nonreferential and writer-oriented poetics, with their own presses, distribution systems, reviewing apparatus, and public forums, they seem in every respect exactly the sort of group that would once have been considered avant-garde without question. And yet it is indeed difficult to apply this label to the language poets, for the cultural model it denotes seems awkward, outmoded, exhausted.[39]

The label "language poetry" (or alternatively, "language writing"), assigned to certain tendencies in American writing since the 1970s has gained currency in recent years in the USA. Originally it was used to refer to a fairly closely knit group of poets, among them Bernstein, Bruce Andrews, Ron Silliman, Barrett Watten, Steve McCaffery, Ray DiPalma, Lyn Hejinian and Bob Perelman. Many of these poets featured in the pages of the journal L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, edited (1978-82) by Bernstein and Andrews; some referred to their work as "language-centred" or "language-based" writing, and over the years the designation "language poetry" has evolved into a shorthand description of the work of these and other, associated writers.[40]

But, although "language poetry" is developing into a way of referring to formalist tendencies in writing generally, it will not do as a designation for the poetry following on from the British Poetry Revival. Although the British scene has features in common and close links with the American one, it has a sufficiently different historical and social origin to make such a conflation unhelpful. (Besides, many of the British poets would resent and reject the label as an American cultural imposition.)

There have been few attempts to come up with a suitable designation — a fact which has enhanced the paradigm's invisibility. The anthologies of such poetry have avoided hoisting identifiable banners. Andrew Crozier's introduction to his and Tim Longville's anthology of largely Cambridge-associated poets, evasively titled A Various Art, famously avoided the issue. The sections of The New British Poetry devoted to this poetry, edited by Eric Mottram and Ken Edwards respectively, were titled "A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry" and "Some Younger Poets". Iain Sinclair's Conductors of Chaos

was simply subtitled "A Poetry Anthology".[41]

There have been recent attempts to promote the use of the definition "linguistically innovative", a variation on the perennial "experimental", most notably in Maggie O'Sullivan's transatlantic anthology of poetry by women, Out of Everywhere[42], subtitled "linguistically innovative poetry by women in North America & the UK". While this goes some way towards defining the attributes of the poetry, it is awkward and arguably excludes those poets who, while exploratory and innovative in their practice, are less disruptive in their surface linguistic play.[43]

"Postmodern" is too nebulous a term to be of much use.[44] "Alternative" is an adjective often applied to this poetry, but it, too, is unsatisfactory, suggesting as it does something that it marginal or second best to the mainstream tradition. However, a term indicating difference of provenance would be of considerable use. Ron Silliman, following on from his consideration of group formation and audiences (see above), has suggested in passing that the poetries under consideration form a parallel tradition to those which constitute the so-called "mainstream".[45] For convenience, then, I propose to refer to the poetries I shall be examining in this study under the group title "the parallel tradition".

Based on an examination of the two poems I have considered and a projection forward into the agenda of this study, a preliminary comparative checklist of features of the two poetries (always remembering that these are tendencies only, that there will be a certain amount of fuzziness at the edges of such dichotomies) might look like this:

THE "MAINSTREAM"	THE PARALLEL TRADITION
"Clarity of expression" — normative language use	Non-normative language use: extended vocabulary and/or broken syntax, parataxis
Coherent narrative, transparency of reference, functionalism	Foregrounding of modes or registers, language as material or sound, constructivism
Single point of view, the lyric voice	Multiple viewpoints or foci, lack of authorial "presence"
Rhetoric or argument	Politics of poetic form
Closure — epiphany	Open form, use of indeterminacy
Foregrounded use of metaphor and simile	Metonymy — material/metaphor overdetermination

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[1] Bernstein (1992) p5.

[2] These are the names mentioned, for example, by Peter Forbes (1988). Donald Davie in Under Briggflatts and Hugh Kenner in A Sinking Island (both discussed in Hampson & Barry (1993) pp1-4) have written about the shift in attention in British writing away from early 20th century modernism — Conrad, Ford, Pound, Joyce, Wyndham Lewis — and towards this more conservative tradition with its emphasis on "intelligibility".

[3] From a transatlantic perspective, Charles Bernstein (1992) suggests that the dominant strain in poetic culture assimilates cultural diversity by selecting works "that accept the model of representation assumed by the dominant culture in the first place. 'I see grandpa on the hill / next to the memories I can never recapture' is the base line against which other versions play: 'I see my yiddishe mama on Hester street / next to the pushcarts I can no longer peddle' or 'I see my grandmother on the hill / next to all the mothers whose lives can never be recaptured' or 'I can't touch my Iron Father / who never canoed with me / on the prairies of masculine epiphany'. Works that challenge these models of representation run the risk of becoming more inaudible than ever within mainstream culture."

[4] In Hampson & Barry (1993). Mottram's chapter heading is "The British Poetry Revival, 1960-75". See also "A Treacherous Assault on British Poetry", the introduction to his section of Allnutt et al (1988).

[5] I leave aside here the question of poetries in other languages, such as Urdu, Gaelic, Irish or Jamaican patois.

[6] I am reminded of the literature officer at London's South Bank Centre, who observed in a private conversation in 1995, following a reading at the Voice Box, that the division in contemporary British poetry seemed to be between "poetry" and "Cambridge poetry". By "Cambridge poetry" this person clearly intended a shorthand for "modernist", "experimental", "avant-garde", "language-based". The principal reason for assigning this division was that the audiences for each of these two kinds of poetry were quite distinct and hardly overlapped at all. And Peter Forbes (1988), writing in The Independent, refers to "a poetic feud of the Sixties and Seventies, with roots further back in the Modernist Movement of the Twenties. On one side are those who believe that Hardy, Yeats, Eliot, Graves, Auden and Larkin, for all their diversity, are the poets from whom to learn.... On the other hand are those who follow Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, and believe that you can 'make it new', as Pound put it, simply by applying a formula copied from the master or by fragmenting and tinkering with language, frequently to the detriment of its rôle as a means of communication." (No question where he stands, then.)

[7] See for example Griffiths & Cobbing (1988) p13; Hampson & Barry (1993) pp45-50. Mottram was then lecturer in the English Department, King's College London, and later to become Professor of American Studies, London University.

[8] Poetry Review was established in 1912.

[9] Only in the 1990s has Poetry Review once again acknowledged the existence of the avant-garde, with occasional articles and book reviews by Keith Jebb and others.

[10] Griffiths & Cobbing (1988) pp18ff.

[11] Posting by Peter Riley to the British-Poets email discussion list, 14/1/98, 8.06pm. For information about this list and how to access archives, see http://www.mailbase.ac.uk/lists/british-poets/

[12] Eric Mottram, in Hampson & Barry (1993) p26. Lest there be any doubt that the "mainstream" is a deliberate construct, Blake Morrison (co-editor of The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry) offers ample evidence in The Movement, his study of Larkin and his cohorts, which shows exactly how they achieved the prominent critical status for their poetry that they now enjoy (Morrison, 1986).

[13] In the early 1970s Fisher was briefly associated with the Fluxus (anti) art movement, more specifically the Fluxshoe exhibition in Britain in 1972-3. Other poets involved with this movement included Dick Higgins and Jackson Mac Low.

[14] Fisher (1985b).

[15] Mottram (1980?); Prynne (1979), and reprinted in Prynne (1982); and Cheek (1980).

[16] Fisher (1985b) p173 (the page numbering is continuous with previous publications in the Spanner series; the following quotes are from the same publication). Much of the following discussion of Necessary Business and matters allied received a first rehearsal in my essay "Paradigm Regained" (Edwards, 1987).

[17] Kuhn (1970).

[18] Kuhn (1970) p208.

[19] Silliman (1986) pxxi.

[20] Fisher (1985b) p176.

[21] Although we should not underestimate the extent to which the American "language" poets have been excoriated by literary conservatives and other poetry factions in that country.

[22] Fisher (1985b) p175. He comments, acerbically and from the heart: "The comprehension gap between the dominating media and any engagement I am able to make with poetry appears to be considerable, and questions of whether human physiology can be generalised proceed to the fore."

[23] Matthew Sweeney's poem appeared in the New Statesman, 24 August 1984, p21. Michael Hofmann's analysis, during which he makes the Beuys comparison, is on the following page of the same issue.

[24] Andrew Motion and Blake Morrison's Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry (Motion & Morrison, 1982) tends to be dominated, on the one hand, by

English adherents to the so-called "Martian" school of the 1980s and those who wrote in similar ways, highlighting recherché metaphors and similes (Craig Raine, Christopher Reid, James Fenton); and on the other by Irish or Northern Irish poets of a less self-conscious kind (Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Paul Muldoon). In this poem, Sweeney appears to belong in the latter camp. However, recent work suggests stylistic changes in the direction of self-conscious, second-hand surrealism: in a review in The Observer (1.2.98) of his book The Bridal Suite (Jonathan Cape, 1997), Kate Kellaway praises the lines "A shoelace and a penis lying in a field / on a cold, blue, February morning"....

[25] Broadcast 25/1/87. I believe the commentary is by Caroline Tisdall.

[26] In the RASP series, 12/12/86 and 13/2/87. This was a continuation of teaching Fisher had done at Goldsmith's College previously. The RASP series (the acronym combines Reality Studios, Actual Size and Spanner, the presses of the three organisers: Ken Edwards, Paul Brown and Fisher) encompassed workshops, talks, film shows and poetry readings.

[27] Fisher (1985a). The poem runs for four pages from p29.

[28] For a much fuller account of Allen Fisher's work, with particular reference to Brixton Fractals, see Bush (1997) pp102-210.

[29] A similar cultural appropriation may also be discerned in the use of the term "postmodernism" in the anthology The New Poetry (Kennedy et al, 1993).

[30] Kauffman (1996) p20.

[31] Times Literary Supplement (1973).

[32] Porter (1989).

[33] Fisher (1985b) p171, cited above.

[34] For example, D S Marriott's (1995) and Anthony Mellors' (1995) essays on American "language" poetry in Fragmente 6 (pp73-91), which, while mounting closely argued attacks on the phenomenon, make scant reference to primary texts. I shall examine these essays in more detail in a later chapter.

[35] For instance, in Mann (1991).

[36] Poggioli (1981), Russell (1985), Bürger (1984).

[37] Mann (1991) p10.

[38] Bernstein (1992) p143.

[39] Mann (1991) p32.

[40] For a fuller discussion of this particular group label, see Perelman (1996) pp17-21.

[41] Crozier & Longville (1987), Allnutt et al (1988), Sinclair (1996).

[42] O'Sullivan (1996).

[43] Or alternatively, it could be argued that all poetry aims to be linguistically innovative, in which case the term is too broad to be of use.

[44] As mentioned in a footnote above, it is applied in the introduction to The New Poetry (Kennedy et al, 1993), which collects poets whose linguistic practice

is by and large normative, even if there is a suggestion in some of socio-political opposition.

[45] In contributions to the Poetics email discussion list. For information about this list and how to access archives, see the Electronic Poetry Centre at http://wings.buffalo.edu/internet/library/e-journals/ub/rift